

# **Roothless Roo**

**T H D Russell**

“Well? Aren’t you going to say something?”

Roo had just explained, in considerable detail and with some drama, the bizarre events of the last month to his quiet and calm younger brother, who typically, but nevertheless annoyingly, had not yet offered any comment on the matter.

They were alone together in Roo’s flat sitting side by side on Roo’s black leather sofa, Roo naked but for a pair of black boxers (and a bandage around his left foot), Peter dressed casually in a t-shirt and knee length shorts. Roo’s face was still half-shaved, half smooth, the shaving foam slowly globbing and drying in the trapped summer heat.

Roothless Roo was not, truth be told, the sort of man one would be well advised to believe. Admittedly he had just had his left foot punctured by a beautiful twenty-one year old girl, but his tale involved the brutal murder of an old man in a disco, the romancing of someone high up in Alcoholics Anonymous – who seemed to have disappeared from the face of the Earth – and his taking a beating in a pub from a couple of friends while quietly playing pool with them. On top of that he claimed to have been fleeced for over twenty grand by the very woman Peter had set him up with a month ago, the woman who had just skewered her stiletto heel into the bridge of his foot. And there had been something about a pigeon's tongue. Peter did not know what to make of it all. Roo had always been so... unreliable.

Pressing against the skin of the long silence, the atmosphere was familiar, but in no way relaxed. Peter had learned long ago to take with a twist of lemon all words that left his brother’s lips, particularly at moments like this, when Roo seemed at his most earnest. Roo was staring at him, expectantly. Peter had to say something.

“What do you want me to say?”

They were exactly the words Roo did not want to hear. Whenever he needed help, whenever he wanted to share his load with his one remaining family member, Peter somehow became as supportive as mist. It never ceased to amaze him – his solid, dependable, hard working brother would simply evaporate when confronted with a request for emotional support.

But this time Roo’s reaction to his brother’s predictable restraint was different. Normally he would become angrier and angrier, try harder and harder to illicit some kind of emotional response from his brother, needing to draw him into his world of turbulence and quick-silver emotions, so that he might have a true companion with him in his personal maelstrom, if only for a moment. Today he simply deflated

with a heart-felt sigh (the like of which Peter had never heard), and flopped back to stare out of the skylight, as his brother had been doing for some minutes. Now he too, was at a loss for words. It had, after all, been a hard month. He had, indeed, been through a lot.

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A little over one month ago, Roothless Roo woke up but, as always, kept his eyes shut. He lay still and listened as carefully as he could, primarily for the unusual, but also for anything one might take for an omen. Omens were important and should not be overlooked. It was a good thing to take a little quiet time each morning to hold one's senses cocked for signs – there was a finely balanced status-quo that needed maintaining.

Hearing nothing suspicious he opened his eyes and watched the ceiling. It was playing host to moving, reflected strips of light that cars, driving by outside, were squeezing into his room through the gap between the curtain-top and window-frame. He enjoyed for a moment the gentle hypnotic effect of their randomly timed motions and then, without the faintest care and without paying attention to anything in particular, sprang from his bed, got dressed and was mere seconds later, unbreakfasted, out on the car-drenched street below his bedroom window, feeling the sun on his shoulders as he set off to do his day's deeds. As usual and as ever he was sure to enjoy himself. He could in fact do nothing else. Put blankly, if he didn't enjoy a thing, he didn't do a thing.

Today held no surprises, which he had already anticipated from the absence of both good and bad signs first thing this morning. It was a day much like most others, which was anyway how he liked them – a gently paced meander from corner to corner of his wee world. He liked to kick his system into gear with a MacDonald's breakfast, then spend some time in a games arcade to work the protein and fat through the arteries, courtesy of excitement driven adrenalin, a few cuss words and pumped victory fists, plus an hour or two at the gym for further calorie processing. After that a large, late lunch at Wagamama's (where almost all the staff knew him), and finally a spot of clothes shopping before popping home for a shower. Nothing like fast flowing hot water to relax you for the evening's activities, which for Roo was either pool with his mates in The Crown, or a movie, and if neither of those two appealed there was always the PS2, and if worst came to worst telephone sex. This evening he fancied a few pints and the clacking of colliding red and yellow balls on green baize. A curry was sure to follow.

Such was the life of Roothless Roo. A life he would have no other way. He had friends, time, looks, money and gadgets, and he was a young thirty with a life of relaxed leisure stretching out in front of him like a beautiful beach. Bliss, if you think about it.

Then one morning, after hearing nothing suspicious while lying quietly attentive in bed, he got up and

inexplicably went to look out of his window. There on the closest tree to him sat two fat magpies. It had to be a sign. On his way downstairs out of his flat he mentioned the birds to a passing neighbour.

“They’ve been there a while now, at least a couple of weeks I reckon. It’s that time of year.”

“Really? I only spotted them this morning.”

Making to turn right from his door, as he always did, he was caused to pause briefly by a little yapping poodle that was, whilst doing its level best to be big and scary, curled behind the plump and bandaged shins of a strange old woman. Roo hesitated, turned left and thought; *well why not, for a change?* He hadn't gone forty paces when he saw walking towards him a dark eyed beauty, curvy and petite. He stopped her, saying,

"Excuse me, do you have the time please and what's the meaning of life?" It came to him on the spot.

His face was a picture of innocence neatly tipped with a smile. He watched her reaction closely. She smiled, which lit up a little her quiet, reserved, yet lively face. He surmised quickly that this girl knew things. She said, after a moment's pause, "It's almost eleven but as to the other matter I'm afraid I haven't a clue." There was a twinkle in her eyes that made Roothless Roo feel left out. He wanted in.

"I think you know," he said boldly. "I think you're lying and I'll prove it to you."

For these words he employed his deadly serious face, and jabbed an index finger straight at her. She said "Oh!?" and sounded surprised, unconvinced and amused all at the same time. But she didn't walk off – he was good looking.

"You want to know how I'll do it, don't you?" said Roothless Roo with his cheeky, challenging face. She said nothing, but still did not walk off.

"I'll show you," he said, sensing that the moment was right, that the cosmos was smiling along with him at this particular juncture, that the planets were drifting into a very favourable alignment, "tonight at nine." Then he paused and turned to face the pub they were both so conveniently standing beside (The Crown, as it happens), pointed to it and continued "In there. OK?"

She blinked, pondered, and then agreed. He smiled at her again, turned crisply on his heel and carried on along his way. *Just think*, he thought, *I could have turned right. That would have been so wrong. I knew left was absolutely the right choice.*

Already it was a good day. It would probably get better too, and if it didn't, he would just do something else.

The change of routine had paid off once so he decided to keep it up and find out what else this newness had in store for him. Instead of MacDonald's he ventured deep into Covent Garden and found a soup bar which offered huge cups of such wonders as Creamed Swede with Coriander and Orange, and Butternut Squash with Apricot and Ginger, but being a cheese freak he picked their Broccoli and Blue Stilton, which he enjoyed very much. He sat on the bar stool savouring the flavours and took some time before paying to take in the décor.

"Nice place you've got here," he said to the girl behind the bar.

"Thank you. We're certainly very proud of it."

"So how long have you guys been in business then?"

"Coming up on four years now, I think... yeah, about four years."

"Now there's a thing. And today's my first visit. It certainly won't be my last," he said with a very charming and sincere smile. (Actually it was his last visit, but Roo had never been a stickler for the truth. In his defence he didn't know it yet.)

Just at that moment Roo's back received a hard slap.

"What's a little prick like you doing in a place like this?"

"Tony! Bloody hell you scared the bejeezus out of me! Shit! Can't a man enjoy a soup and a chat in peace and quiet without someone knocking ten years off his life?"

"Calm down mate, I was only being friendly. I never seen you in 'ere before. You're a MacDonald's man aintcha?"

"I just felt like a change. And for that I get a whopping hand-shaped bruise on my back."

"Well will wonders never cease! Roothless Roo felt like a change," Roo's tattooed companion enunciated each word slowly and deliberately, "stone the fucking crows."

Roo gracefully slid off his bar stool. "Stone the *magpies*, Tony. Today it's the magpies that want stoning. Enjoy your soup, I'll catch you later no doubt." He flashed a farewell smile and went back out onto the street.

Once outside he felt the first touches of a London drizzle and looked skywards – rolling grey clouds as far as the eye could see. *Not a park day then*, thought Roo, at a loss as to what to do next. Walking aimlessly through the wet air he arrived quite by accident outside The National Gallery, and for the second time in

as many hours found himself being guided by the ‘Why Not’ impulse, and marched in.

Despite having been good at drawing at school this was his first time in an art gallery, which he found to be very quiet. The only sounds were provided by shoes of various hardnesses, shuffling out rhythms of various speeds. Actually the effect was quite nice – sort of calming. He added his feet to the flow and wandered around, standing in front of the paintings in what seemed to him to be the correct, reverential manner; leaning forwards slightly, hands held behind his back, and then perhaps tilting his head a little to one side, maybe even rubbing his chin. It was all good stuff.

Very tiring though – he had finally lost the battle with a yawn that had succeeded at its fourth attempt to stretch Roo’s mouth into an O. He checked the time: 16:43. *Time for lunch*. But he had had enough changes for one day; he could hear Wagamama’s calling to him across the wet and shining pavements. He could see the cold, gold Kirin waiting for him.

Later on, belly happily full with salmon ramen while finally relaxing in the shower, he remembered he was to meet that dark haired girl at The Crown. He had yet to think how he might prove she knew the meaning of life. All that occurred was that the proof was in her eyes. But that just would not cut the mustard – even though it might very well be the truth, so to speak.

He wondered what her name might be. She had looked foreign, but her voice sounded English. Maybe she had an Italian parent. Maybe she was Maria, or Sophia. Sophia was a nice name. He stepped out of the shower, brushed his teeth while dripping a puddle on the blue tiles and staring in the mirror at the frantic hand movements and foam build-up teeth-brushing is, spat, rinsed, grabbed a towel, rubbed himself dry-ish and flopped naked onto the sofa to watch some TV.

At five to nine he peeled himself off the sofa with a loud ripping noise and got dressed. On closing the door to his flat he realised he had not got a clue how he would prove his assertion. Oh well. He’d just have to wing it. He was good at winging it. It was how he lived, more or less.

In The Crown Sophia was not to be seen. Roothless Roo strode to the bar and ordered his usual – a pint of Kronenbourg.

“Right you are Roo”, said Bob the barkeep, “coming right up. Any news?”

“No news, Bob, nothing today. Just waiting for a girl. Should be here any minute. Small, curvy, black hair. I’m gonna go sit over there. Give me a wave if you see her come in would you? Cheers.”

“No problemo, happy to oblige”, said Bob.

Roothless Roo sat himself down at the table he had just pointed out. It was not something he ordinarily did

– sitting at a table – preferring the bar or playing pool with his mates. Tonight, without asking himself why, he had decided to hide from his view the entrance to the pub and wait in the shadows, as it were, for his prey. He felt mysterious sitting there, and wished he were a smoker, or that he could obscure his face with a wide brimmed hat. But he owned no hat. He would buy one tomorrow.

Then, just before he had drunk his beer down to the half-way mark, Bob waved at him – Sophia must have arrived. Unusually Roo felt a little nervous activity kick into action at the base of his stomach. *Ooh*, he thought, *that's not like me. How exciting.* He watched as Bob turned his back to him to address her, then, with his back still to him, point backwards to where Roo was sitting. Three seconds later Sophia ambled into view. Roothless Roo stood up crisply and smiled a warm and welcoming smile, which widened at Sophia's first words.

“You're that bloke what called me a liar.” But her cheeks flushed and she laughed nervously, instantly diminishing to nil the potential witty austerity of her challenge. She had one hand on her handbag, the dark brown leather strap of which was slung over her shoulder. The other hand hung a little uncertainly at her side. She seemed to be simultaneously picking at both thumbs with both forefingers.

“Did I? How cruel of me! Let me buy you a drink by way of apology. What would you like?”

“A diet coke please, with ice and lemon if they have them.”

“Of course they do! Do I look like a man who would frequent a bar that didn't serve sliced-lemon!?”

Roo went to order the coke, worried that he had propositioned a teetotal. She was acting a little nervous too. Nerves put him off. As the butterflies settled down in his belly he decided he'd give it a few minutes and see.

A few minutes later he was still sitting beside her, she somehow hidden from him by the manner of her posture and the thickness of her hair, he leaning forward trying to penetrate the defensive spell. But neither had broached the topic that had brought them together for the evening.

The few minutes became half an hour, the one coke and beer became two and then, without his face giving any clue of imminent change whatsoever, Roo leapt from his chair and said:

“Let's go out!”

“We are already out.”

“Yes yes yes,” said Roo, a little dismissively, “of course that. I mean somewhere more exciting. Food perhaps, or the flicks, or dancing, or music. London has a lot to offer. What's your name, by the way?” He

was still standing.

“Alice,” replied Sophia.

“Ah,” said Roo reflectively, “I thought it was Sophia. But Alice is kinda nice too, when you think about it a little.”

Alice just smiled, but after a puzzled pause ventured “And what’s your name?”

“Well, that’s a little tricky.” Roo flashed a brilliant smile.

“Too hard a question...?”

“No, it’s just, well, which one, that’s the... Actually my name is Roo.”

“Ru?”

“Yes. Roo.”

“That’s not a name I’ve heard before...” smiled Alice, looking calmly and surely into Roothless Roo’s soul.

“No,” said Roo, turning his face from her curious gaze and small smile, “most people haven’t. Shall we skedaddle?”

“Oookaaaay, but er, where to?”

“We can decide that when we get there,” answered Roo brightly.

“I see.”

And off they went.

In the black cab heading towards Leicester Square nobody spoke for about the first two minutes. It was their first silence. Alice broke it by outing the thought that had been spinning around in her head since they left the pub.

“Ru,” she began. “Is that an English name? Did your parents think it up, or-”

“I sort of... It’s a nickname. It’s short for Rupert.”

“Well then. Now I understand. And if I wanted to call you Rupert...?”

“No one does,” answered Roothless Roo, flatly.

“Oh,” said Alice, smiling.

When they finally got to the undecided upon place, Roo decided to go dancing. He was in the mood for an energetic evening and wanted to see if Alice was game for a laugh. He coaxed her in with a few awkward dance moves improvised on the pavement outside, in full sight of the pristine, freshly shaved, DJ wearing bouncer. Alice was actually touched that Roo would make such efforts to entice her, but swore vehemently she would not dance, pointing out that Rupert was good enough for two. He winked and promised her she would, offered a cocked right arm (which she accepted) and led her briskly in.

He had still said nothing about the meaning of life thing.

It was a thin, long, dark and sparkly place, with a small round dance-floor, lots of chrome, a small bar crowded with three variously dancing bar-tenders, one male, two female, and about fifteen tables, all taken. Only two people were dancing, both were girls, both were drunk. There may even have been a shiny metal-leaved palm tree standing in one corner, and if there was, it was most definitely lightly decorated with dust and cobwebs. As Roo approached the bar, apparently having forgotten to ask Alice what she might like, one of the female bar-tenders seemed to recognise him and jiggled in his direction. Leaning at full stretch towards one another they managed to get face to face, then mouth to ear. Alice watched intently and was surprised to feel her skin prickle as Roo turned his head back to point her out. The red-head nodded slowly and smiled in her direction. A few moments later Roo arrived with two identical looking drinks and gave one to Alice. Lowering his mouth to her ear he shouted

“Drink! It’s peppered vodka! Veeery interesting!”

He was smiling widely and wagging his eyebrows up and down at her, but despite this worrying behaviour Alice took a sip. Never having heard of peppered vodka before she allowed her curiosity to get the better of her. She swallowed a schluck and neither gagged nor coughed, nor did she hang her tongue out to cool it down. She simply turned to face his beaming eyes and nodded her approval, then turned back to watch the two rather waddly dancers.

Suddenly Roo was nudging her excitedly in the ribs; he had already finished his drink and was making gestures that said it was now her turn. Alice shook her head so Roothless Roo fell to one knee and set his face to pleading, then put down his drink on the floor beside him, and clasped his hands together in mock prayer. ‘No’ mouthed Alice again, this time within the tight confines of a smile. Roo’s face fell but a glint in his eyes suggested he was not done yet. He suddenly collapsed prostrate to the floor, but in so doing knocked over his empty tumbler (which fell down two steps and shattered) and kicked a man at the bar who turned angrily around to see what was going on. Roo quickly clambered to his feet, placed his hand

apologetically on the man's shoulder, then shot behind the bar and returned with a dustpan and brush, which he used to sweep up the broken glass. While he was gone to dispatch the bits Alice downed her vodka in two large slugs (to steady her nerves).

Roo returned, and saw that Alice's glass was now empty. He gave a huge smile of relief and joy, took her glass and placed it on the bar, then grabbed her wrist and dragged her to the dance-floor. Too small to resist effectively Alice was powerless to prevent her appearance on the darkly shining wooden round. Her flat shoes slid across the herring-bone parquet slats as she was tugged past the sweating, strutting blondes but came to a resolute stop as they reached the floor's centre. Alice stood stock still and folded her arms across her chest. Roo seemed unaffected by her refusal to party and boogied away, all the while grinning at her wildly. The old cigarette-butt that had been stuck to his shirt since he had pressed himself to the floor finally fell off.

Then the vodka hit Alice square in the tension department. And as if God were well and truly on Roo's side, her current favourite song started. She gave in with a sigh and danced happily opposite this strange and exuberant man. Roothless Roo, his attention never fixed on only one thing for any serious length of time, spotted on the buckle of each blonde's handbag (yes, they were dancing around them), the image of a magpie. Two for joy.

And then something unexpected happened. They were joined on the dance-floor by an old man who had made his somewhat slow way from his table in the nightclub's shadows. Apparently he was drawn to the combined energies that Roo and Alice were emitting for he now stood beside them with a very affectionate smile on his face, watching their moves. He looked to be over eighty years old. Roo and Alice smiled back at him and carried on dancing. He nodded what seemed to be approval and then started to copy Roo. "Alright!" shouted Roo, thrilled that such a cool old dude would be inspired to do something so crazy and spontaneous. Roo started to jump up and down, completely unable to contain his enthusiasm. The old man followed suit. A few moments later however, the old chap's exertions started to take their toll.

He stopped dancing. His smile slipped, then hovered for a very long second in a position of concerned self-enquiry, finally twisting into an expression of extreme worry and pain. He stiffened, grabbed at his heart, then sank to his knees before finally falling over on his back, where he arched for what seemed an age, quivering like a strummed string, then slumped to stillness.

Roo was responsible. He had egged the codger on, had driven him to jump up and down like a maniac. He glanced over at Alice who was looking down at the old man, a look of horror on her face. He had to do something. He knelt down by the man's head and got the spittle covered mouth open by pushing the chin downwards with one hand, while his other held the forehead steady. Then, on the stormy brink of panic,

Roo lowered his lips to the man's mouth, fumbled to get a tight fit, and blew. Nothing gave; the life-saving air stayed trapped in their four bulging cheeks. Roo raised his head, took a deep breath and tried again, this time with a much harder blow.

Mucus burst from the old man's nose as if fired from a shotgun and splattered all over Roo's left cheek and into his ear. With a loud "FUCK!" he leapt to his feet wiping frantically at his face, spinning away from Alice, who was now kneeling beside the man checking for a pulse.

The music stopped and then a bouncer arrived on the dance-floor, but did nothing in particular. Alice looked up at Roo to tell him to dial 999, but his face was now fixed in a strangely broken shape, stiff, wordless and hollow, flecked with snot. She looked over at the bouncer instead, who read her face and made the call.

After the ambulance men had taken the corpse away, and the police had finally gone, Alice and Rupert sat in silence together on the steps to the bar. Neither could think of a thing to say. Roo stood up and went to the bar to collect a pen, which he used to write his name and telephone number on the back of Alice's hand. She in turn wrote hers on the back of his. Then, gently, Roo led Alice from the club into the soft light of that Saturday's dawn.

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Eyes still shut and listening closely to all audible noises, Roo felt awful. So awful in fact he could not stay focused on his ritual, and found his thoughts carried him away from the here and now, directly back to last night. The police had been understanding while questioning him, reserving their tougher questions for the club's management and bouncer, but as there was apparently no upper age limit to night-clubs, in the eyes of the law no one was to blame. Least of all Roothless Roo. The police had congratulated him on his bravery and selflessness in such a stressful situation, and even suggested he take a course in first aid. Roo was not to blame. He was not guilty. The old man had chosen of his own volition to join in and jump around. Roo had not forced him. All in all, it had simply been a very weird night, one for the grandchildren to hear about. He decided to put it behind him and carry on as before.

He leapt out of bed but saw from the clock he had missed MacDonald's breakfast: 11:31. This was a bad thing but could not be rectified – best to forget it. There was not an inch of himself he considered Michael Douglas-esque, and even if there were, it would do him no good. Perhaps – it was a long shot – perhaps there was something in the kitchen he could eat.

Walking passed his full-length mirror he paused to admire his physique and caught sight of the dark blue numbers on the back of his left hand. Their colour and blurriness made him think about Dustin Hoffman and Laurence Olivier, about films and cinemas and then about tonight. He and Alice had agreed on

nothing, for obvious reasons, so he had in fact nothing to do that was special. (Or perhaps there was a party? He couldn't recall.) Perhaps Alice had nothing special to do either. Having nothing special to do was tantamount to boring, and boring was tantamount to death.

"Hello?"

"Ah... I called you..."

"Is that Roo?"

"Hi Alice. Yes, it's Roo."

"When?"

"When what?"

"When did you call me?"

"Just now."

"But I didn't here the phone ring..."

"Then how did you know to answer?"

"What?"

"You said... No wait... No I meant I'm sort of..." Roo's voice trailed off.

"Sort of what?"

"I hadn't expected to, but here I am. Isn't that funny..." His voice trailed off again. A few seconds of rich silence, as thick as a melted Mars, oozed between them. Roo pulled himself free of it first.

"You er, busy tonight, at all?"

"Yes, actually I've got a party to go to."

"Oh? A good one?"

"Well let's hope so. No one likes a bad party. Listen, are you-"

"Of course not. No, I don't suppose they do... So... anyway I'd better..." and Roo hung up.

“What are you DOING?!” he shouted at himself in the mirror, still holding his mobile phone. It caught his attention so he started to try and crush it in his hand, his face a quivering battle of frustrations and angers. It rang. He froze. It carried on ringing. Obviously it was Alice’s number.

“Hi.” He pushed his hand through his hair, watching the casual action in the mirror.

“Are you OK? You sounded, well, weird.”

“A momentary lapse. Back to normal now. Naked and normal, proper morning fare. Hungry of course, like the wolf, thoughts revolving celibately around food and so on. Hair's a mess. And how are you?”

“I’m fine, couldn't sleep though... Listen-”

“Alice I’ve got to dash. Lot’s to do today; I’ve got to see a man about a hat, eat, and maybe there’s something else I’ve forgotten. In fact I’m sure there is. I’ll call you. OK?”

And Roo hung up on her for the second time in less than a minute, but heard her receding voice say “A hat?” before his finger could depress the little red phone icon. Then as an afterthought he switched his phone off.

The trick now was to zen out, to empty the mind and forget. Food was the key, which meant entering the kitchen. He found pasta, oil and some old margarine. Not one of the three combinations that occurred to him was even remotely appetising, so he now had the choice of either eating out, or shopping. Unexpectedly the idea of walking around a supermarket pushing a trolley appealed to him, perhaps because it had been so long since his last trip to Sainsbury’s, or perhaps because it suddenly seemed like a cool thing to do. It certainly was original. He agreed with himself with a nod and even showered before getting dressed, having put on Paranoid Android before getting into the cubicle. As the water steamed around him he could just make out the music in the background, and sung along loudly, remembering the words perfectly:

“Rain down, rain down...”

An hour and a half later his hunger was gone and he sat looking at the empty, stained yellow, oily plastic container of a microwave curry. No washing up apart from the fork. What a wonderful world it was. To make it more wonderful he threw the fork away with the plastic dish. Then he phoned Tony from the land line.

“Roo my old mucker! What are you up to?”

“I was gonna ask you the same question. Fancy a game of pool and a few beers?”

“You paying?”

“Of course.”

“See you there mate.”

Tony arrived with a stranger, who turned out to be Dave. Dave had more tattoos than Tony, and most of them were rude.

“You the free beer bloke?” he asked Roo.

“That’ll be me,” said Roo, with a smile.

“Mine’s a lager.”

As Roo was at the bar getting the pints in, someone shouted “He’s such a fucking wanker!” behind him. He turned round to see Dave and Tony looking at him, laughing. He took the beers over and put them down by the pool table.

“What’s the matter Roo? You look a bit worried mate,” asked Tony, the look on his face suggesting his enquiry had ulterior motives.

“I’m all right.”

“We wasn’t talking about you, if that’s what you was thinking.”

Dave leaned across Roo to get his beer, and downed half of it in two huge gulps. Then, after a pause while he seemed to be thinking about something, belched into Roo’s face. It smelt of meat.

“Mine’s a lager,” he said.

Roo looked at Tony.

“What’re you looking at me for? I ain’t gonna give it you, am I?” Tony and Dave barked out a short volley of aggressive laughter.

“It’s just, I thought we were here to play some pool,” said Roo.

“Pool’s for wankers!” shouted Dave, his lips almost touching Roo’s ear-hair.

“You’re not a wanker, are you?” asked Tony.

Roo dragged a smile up from somewhere deep down inside, tilted his head a little to one side, and said “Is this a wind up?”

In answer Tony grabbed Roo around the neck with the nook of his arm and rubbed his fist on his head. “Gotchaaaaargh!” he said.

So after the weirdness of the first exchanges the evening's pool finally got under way, but Roo, normally in his element at a pool table in his local, could not settle into any sort of rhythm. He felt distracted, discombobulated, assailed from within by some pressing, harrying thing.

Three pints later and Rupert's heart would still not stop thrashing. He was already, at least in terms of alcoholic units to time, well on his way to merriment – he had downed his beers in under (he checked his watch) 40 minutes. But he could not relax. He was awkward, unfluid, unspontaneous, uncool. Tony and Dave were still being arseholes, teasing and swearing and at times downright insulting him, but he was used to that, he knew it didn't really mean anything. And then it occurred to him that it might be last night. Maybe he should...

“I killed an old man last night.” announced Roo.

“You fucking what?” asked Tony.

“We were at this club, me and this girl, dancing away, and this old bloke comes up to us and starts to dance. He must have been over eighty. Pretty cool I thought, old guy living it up, having a laugh. So I start jumping up and down and he copies me, jumping around like a loony. And then he had a heart attack. Died on the floor right in front of me.”

Dave did not look impressed by the brave admission. “You killed an old granddad!?” he roared.

“Actually the cops let me go,” said Roo, “they said it was his choice to dance.”

“What the fuck do those cunts know about it!” Dave stepped up opposite Roo, close, menacing, the width of a sheet of paper separating their noses. “You killed someone’s old granddad” he whispered.

“But the police said –”

Dave’s face took on the alarming contours of a feral snarl. “I don’t give a fuck what they think –”

“Dave! Dave mate, leave it. He’s all right.” Tony was holding Dave by the arm, gently tugging him back from Roo.

“He’s a CUNT!” shouted Dave, butting Roothless Roo on the final word of his short, imaginative sentence

– but without real force – then stepped back and away from his victim, whose nose started to bleed.

With Dave out of the way Roo noticed that Alice was standing by the door watching the scene. The first thing he noticed about her was that she looked gorgeous, and had a hot slab of sunshine gleaming around her.

“This isn't boring” announced Rupert loudly, with more than a hint of quaver in his voice, the unplanned words leaving his mouth in a state of shock at their sudden and unexpected emergence. He seemed on the verge of tears.

Alice walked slowly and calmly to Roo and took his hand, shot a withering look at Tony and Dave, and lead Roo out of the pub, where she gave him a tissue for his nose.

“Thanks, but it's not that bad. I bleed easy.” Roo dabbed at his nose and then looked at the round red stains on the white tissue.

“Who are those people?” asked Alice.

“Just a couple of mates. Dave, the one who head-butted me, didn't like the fact that I killed that old man last night.”

“You didn't kill him! He died of a heart-attack. And what do you mean by 'mates' exactly? They hardly –”

“I don't know. I was the one who got him so excited.”

“But you didn't invite him. It was just a really, really unfortunate event, a horrible coincidence you happened to get caught up in.”

“My father died a couple of years ago. He was only 52. You know...” But Roo didn't seem to want to finish his sentence.

“I'm so sorry, I had no idea.”

“How could you?” He paused for a moment, then asked “Do you think I need a drink?”

Alice looked at him. He had a hollow look in his eyes, as if a still, empty ocean had massed between his mind and pupils.

“No,” she said, “I don't think you need a drink. Anyway I came to find you to ask you to that party. For a while I thought maybe I shouldn't, because last night was so stressful – I know I hardly slept, and you look terrible –”

“Thanks.”

“– but then I thought, why not? What could be better than company, and more importantly what could be worse than loneliness, after what happened last night? Did you switch your phone off or something?”

“That’s a good point! Shit. I’d better turn it on. Maybe people are trying to get in touch with me.”

Roo, slightly wobbly now the fresh air had combined with the alcohol, retrieved his mobile from his jacket, switched it on, entered the code, and no sooner had it finished initialising, it rang.

“It’s Pete, my brother. I better talk to him.” Roo answered the phone and burped loudly into it. “Hi Peter, how are you? Sorry about the burp.”

“At least I can’t smell it. Anyway where the hell have you been? I’ve been trying to get you for hours. I hope you haven’t forgotten about tonight. Are you drunk?”

“What about tonight?”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me.” sighed Peter. “Rupert, you are going to come to our house tonight to a dinner party, where you will be meeting a girl I think you will like. Even Sarah thinks you’ll like her. Hello?”

Rupert was staring at Alice. “Ah yes, that thing. To be honest it had completely slipped my mind... Can I call you back?”

“Oh for Christ’s sake Roo! You will come, you already said you –”

“I’ll call you right back. I’m in the middle of something.” Roo hung up.

Roo didn’t want not to go, but he didn’t want to go either. And his nose hurt. And Alice had come to find him. And she looked so nice somehow, so warm, so something else.

But it was already almost three pm, which meant all the food would have been bought, and Sarah would already be cooking and he had already said yes a few weeks back. Actually, he had no choice, he had to go to Peter’s dinner party.

What was surprising about this realisation, was that normally he would just wriggle away from the unwanted and get himself over to the wanted. But standing here outside The Crown, beside the girl who had rescued him (was it really a rescue?), he was truly torn. Even though Peter was an anal prick, even though his taste in women was about as far away from Roo’s as it could get, and even though he had been through the weirdest twenty hours of his life, he had the sense that doing the right thing was, this time, the

right thing to do.

“Alice,” he said, “I did forget something. I have a party tonight, a dinner party with my brother and his wife. But it’s five hours away. Would you like to do something now? With me I mean?”

\*

“So. Your brother Peter and his wife are cooking for you this evening. Are you going to have any space left after this food? It was food, wasn’t it?”

Roothless Roo and Alice were sitting opposite each other in a greasy spoon café, having just polished off a couple of plates of pie, beans and mashed potato (Roo having done most of the polishing). Roo was smiling at Alice lightly, the faint sickle of his smile more affect than reality, its reason for being there undetectable, particularly should you look for the half-smile’s justification in his eyes. In a way Alice had not seen before, Roo was not listening.

“Do you think that old man had family?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but the police might. That poor old man. He looked so sweet and out-of-place. Maybe the police would give you some –”

“He had such a friendly smile. I would’ve liked to learn a bit about him, find out what made him decide to go clubbing, you know?”

“Maybe he was dying of cancer or something, or maybe he was lonely, or bored... Or all three. Maybe he wanted that ending –”

“Maybe he was lonely” echoed Roo. “That could drive you to anything.”

“You think?”

And whatever strange vapour had been blurring Roo’s edges dispersed in that instant. He snapped a sharp stare at Alice, and then smiled a broad and shining smile.

“You’re nice, Alice, did you know that? Really nice. I think I could get to like you.” Then he frowned.

“My nose still hurts.”

But now Alice was not listening and she lowered her eyes to look at her plate. She checked her watch, which Roo spotted.

“You in a hurry?”

“No. Just thinking about getting ready for the party, how long it might take. It’s almost four now, I could be back by five, bath, make-up –”

“So you want to get going then. I’ll get the bill.”

“No, it’s OK, I can wait another hour.” She smiled politely at Roo, who looked at her without expression.

“Coffee?” he said suddenly, “I know I could use one.” But before Alice could answer he had leapt from the table and was ordering two coffees at the till.

“Nice place this,” he said, returning to his seat.

“Hmm,” said Alice, twisting a cord of her black hair around an index finger and looking sideways out of the window. There followed a stretch of silence between them. They both watched the cars hum by, the people on the pavement going quickly and quietly here and there, and the pigeons on the roof tops and on the kerbs, puffing out their feathers, strutting, pecking, taking off and landing. Roo broke the silence.

“Well, I like it anyway. Simple, unfussy, cheap, hearty. What do you do?”

“Sorry?”

“What do you do? For a living?”

She sighed, then answered, “I’m an administrator cum secretary cum PA at Alcoholics Anonymous.” It sounded like a description Alice had given out thousands of times, expecting some cheap comment in return.

“Oh,” said Roo, shifting a little uncomfortably in his seat. “Do you get to see –?” but the coffees arrived and Roo didn’t finish his sentence.

“Do I get to see what?” asked Alice, sipping her coffee. She put the cup back in the saucer with a deep frown and a shudder.

“You know, the sad old men and weirdos that –”

“It’s not like that at all. You’d be surprised how – how can I put it? – how uplifting it can be.”

“Sure, sure. I bet.” Roo sipped his coffee. His forehead wrinkled as deeply as Alice’s had. “Ow! That’s actually harmful.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “That’s got to be the worst coffee I have *ever* tasted. I HATE this place. I don’t know how I managed to get that fat and gristle pie, mine *and* about three quarters of yours thank you very much, into my stomach, via my mouth I might add. And that mashed-

potato was about 50% water wasn't it?"

"The beans were all right."

"Yeah I noticed you ate them up!"

And then they started laughing a loud, conspiratorial laugh that sealed them off together for its entire one minute.

"We've only known each other a few hours but already we've packed in a lot of weird shit. I'll be telling my grandchildren about our adventures for sure."

Alice agreed with a nod and a smile. Suddenly she was looking at him and he was looking at her, and in the small space before it became uncomfortable enough for her to have to look away, it was very pleasant and cosy indeed.

"I think Rupert's a nice name," she said to her coffee.

"It was my mother's choice. You would have liked her."

Despite her curiosity, Alice didn't ask.

Later, when they were walking together to the bus stop that Alice needed to get home, she leaned against him and he put his arm around her, and it was as if it had always been that way. They had never kissed, and indeed they never would, but this contact was like a kiss. To Roo she felt soft and safe, but at the very same moment he noticed its naturalness and warmth, that gentle contact chilled him to the bone.

The meaning of life had, for the time being anyway, receded to the distant background.

\*

"Roo, this is Annabel. Annabel, this is my elder, and only, brother Roo."

"Darling! You make him sound like a monk," teased Sarah, and winked at Roo.

"I hope that's not true," said Annabel, offering her hand.

She was wearing a loose, pale blue mini-skirt and a tight white blouse, and had, Roo was quick to notice, an extremely nice body. He smiled at Peter warmly before swapping a 'nice to meet you' with the new object of his attention. She smiled widely at him, her blue-green eyes sparkling in a very welcoming – welcoming to the point of inviting – manner.

Drinks were fetched and sipped, soft, cream-coloured sofas occupied and polite conversation endured. As the evening wore on the conversations became easier, the flirting more daring, the distances closer. Roo was on top form, even doing his astrology show, and, as luck would have it, correctly guessed that Annabel was a Leo (unless of course she was lying). Holding her hand and looking deep into her eyes, Roo told her all he knew about Leo ladies, pouring words like elegance, beauty, regal, warm, sensuous, proud and generous over her waiting face. She lapped them all up, was putty in his hands and at the evening's end followed him out of the flat and into a taxi, which sped them through the lamp lit streets from Chelsea to Waterloo while on its black leather seats Roo and Annabel kissed and hugged and giggled all the way to his flat.

Lying on her side, resting her head on her hand and looking at Roo's face, Annabel started to ask questions.

"Is it true what your brother says about you?"

"About me being a lazy bum you mean?"

"Mm."

"One hundred and one percent. The way I figure it, why bust a gut doing some boring old job when you don't even need to."

Roo felt fantastic. Annabel was a great lay, enjoyed sucking and looked as good out of clothes as she did in them.

"I have a great life; I do what I want when I want, I've got gadgets, a flat, friends, a local and I'm healthy and young. Why Peter bothers with all that investment banking crap I'll never know. Some weeks, so Sarah tells me, he works like one hundred hours. One hundred! And he's always flying off somewhere. Either he's greedy or an idiot. Both probably, now that I think about it. Mind you, he picked you out for me, so he can't be all bad." Roo rolled on to his side to face Annabel and brushed her nose lightly with his thumb. "You are quite a woman. And I should know."

"You've been around the block have you?"

"I don't like to say." He rolled onto his back and put his hands behind his head.

"I like a man with experience." She leaned towards him and sucked on his earlobe with her hot wet mouth.

"That's n i i c e," shivered Roo, "but you missed the sweet spot by about three feet."

“Naughty!” giggled Annabel, moving slowly down his torso, and between kisses breathed the following question, “So *\*kiss\** you’re rich *\*kiss\** are you?”

“I don't like to say.”

“How wonderful,” she managed, before getting back down to business.

\*

Roothless Roo was worried. Roothless Roo was never worried.

In the space of a month he had taken Annabel to New York, Paris and Milan, and the girl knew how to spend money. Normally he avoided this sort of recklessness, having kept a tight control for five years on his monthly outgoings, knowing full well that he had to keep his capital intact in order to protect his perfect future, but she had a way of making it all seem so ‘done’. And she made him feel masculine and successful to boot. The combination was intoxicating.

His routines and habits had also changed. Actually, aside from the gym, there were none left. There was something about being with Annabel that made games arcades and pool seem immature, but another (quieter) part of him wanted all of it back again. He couldn’t remember the last time he had taken a quiet moment to pay attention for signs and worried about that too, worried that he might be missing something. He certainly missed MacDonald’s. Actually he couldn’t remember any other girl who had had such a strong influence on him.

He was sure he could get the situation back under control again, that he could be disciplined enough to recoup the twenty grand he had scattered like confetti across the world. It would certainly take time, but at least it was doable. He just needed to sit her down and tell it to her straight. But on the one occasion he had tried to set things straight, she had somehow managed to change the subject and they had ended up screwing.

Alice had stopped calling too. Not that he had ever answered any of her calls; it’s just that it had been nice to know she was still trying. But most pressing of all his concerns and ruminations was the photograph he now held in his hand of the man who had died in front of his eyes on a disco dance-floor a little over a month ago. Roo had indeed contacted the police and discovered that he had died alone, a bachelor and a pauper. Since there was no next of kin, and because Roo was the closest thing to a friend the old man seemed to have, the police had given him his effects, which added up to not much more than a couple of books (*Great Expectations* and *Up The Junction*) and a handful of photographs. Being in possession of the remains of another man’s life was something Roo had thus far kept to himself, not even telling Annabel about it.

His name turned out to be Ronald Henry Smith and he was born in north London on the 30<sup>th</sup> August 1927. More than that Roo did not know, and he did not want to find out either. The few photographs he had, he felt, told him all the important things. Two were particularly interesting to him. One was a portrait with a date on the back in faded blue ink (1955) and the other was of a woman that looked like it might have been taken around the same period. Roo assumed she had been a girlfriend and wondered what had stopped them from marrying. She was a frumpy thing and made him think of World War Two and rationing and factories churning out shiny bombs and artillery shells. She looked unhappy standing alone on a pier, leaning slightly back against a black railing. Behind her the sea was a dark and agitated grey. She wore what looked like a silk scarf tied around her head, out from which a few black curls of hair were poking. A strong wind was blowing the bottom of her coat open, and her arms were extended down across her middle, as if to hold the rest of the coat together. Her ankles were skinny and her shoes plain. She was probably wearing tights – Roo didn't want to imagine the black material covering her legs could be stockings.

The portrait of R H Smith was mesmerising. Roo had never seen such an expressionless face. He could only just tell that the face of the man he was looking at was an earlier version of the one that had smiled so warmly at him a month ago. In the photograph the mouth seemed smaller, the lips pressed tight together, as if biting down on some cruel piece of information. The nose was too large for the face and the eyes dull and tired, if a little wary. He had a thin, spidery moustache (which the older man had been without) that tickled his upper lip and very, very neat, shiny black hair – he had managed a parting which looked straight enough to cut glass.

Roo leaned back into his black leather sofa and looked up through the skylight into the bright blue yonder. He was shaved and smartly dressed, ready to go in fact, but had been having a hard time leaving his flat. And it was getting late. He hated being late. Annabel hated him being late too (it had only happened once), and she was not averse to letting her feelings be known on the matter. Nevertheless he was hesitating.

He pulled up one of the sofa's cushions and stuffed the two photographs under it, then pulled his mobile phone out of his jacket pocket, made to make a call, changed his mind and put it back again unused. He went to his bathroom mirror, leant on the basin and looked into his eyes. The two rings told him nothing. They looked like they always looked; black on blue on white.

“Fuck it.”

He retrieved his mobile phone again and switched it off, changed out of his smart and into more casual clothes, walked out of his flat and strode purposefully for MacDonald's, games arcades and independence.

He did not switch his phone back on until the next morning, by which time it had gathered a few SMSs and voice messages from Annabel and one from Peter. None were friendly, and the last two or three from Annabel were positively violent. They lit a delicious, angry fire in his belly. They made him realise how far he had come away from the routine that had kept him happy and stable and on course for a wonderful, stress-free life. It was suddenly blindingly clear to him; he had had enough of this shit. Sure, it had been a fun (if rather expensive) month and the sex had been wonderful, but it was time to set things straight. He called Annabel.

Last night had been perfect, the quarter-pounder with cheese was a beefy piece of heaven and he had even managed a new high score on his current favourite game at the arcade. At the pub there had been two girls with whom he had flirted; they had allowed him to teach them some pool, had permitted a little back-of-neck-nibbling, had enjoyed it when he growled deep and soft in their ears and not one person, not one, had interfered with them the whole evening. Fantastic. That was how life should be. Why wasn't Annabel answering?

“Hi, Annabel, this is Roo. Give me a call.”

Oh well. Maybe she was still asleep.

He had just finished shaving the left side of his face when the intercom buzzed. His right cheek was still covered in shaving foam.

“Hello?” he spoke into the mike.

“Please let me in” crackled the intercom back at him.

It was Annabel and she sounded quite sad, pathetic even. Ordinarily Roo would move heaven and earth to avoid even the smallest amount of face time with naked emotion in a girlfriend, but he had not expected someone like Annabel to call so soon after being stood up and buzzed her in, unable to think of a feasible excuse. He steeled himself for the task, convincing himself it would be fun to dump the money grabbing bitch, and opened the door just as Annabel was making it up the last few steps.

Her attire quite took the puff out of him. Slung over one arm was the imitation mink (s)he had bought while they were in Milan. What was peculiar about this was not that it was a hot summer's day, but that apart from the fire red stilettos she was completely naked. She wasn't even wearing any jewellery.

“Annabel, I'm glad you're –”

“Shut up Rupert and pay attention.” Roo closed the door after her and folded his arms. He noticed his mouth was still open. He shut it and studied Annabel closely, head cocked to one side; strangely she appeared on the verge of apoplexy.

“I –”

“I said shut up!” Annabel flung her coat on the sofa and pointed a quivering index finger at him. She stepped towards him, finger still raised. The sharp points of her heels left little wounds in the carpet and while everything from her neck down appeared to be vibrating, and indeed glistening, her voice was eerily steady.

“I have never been stood up before and it will never happen again. Do you have any idea how stupid I looked last night?”

A few images sprung to mind but he managed to dispel them before they took hold. His face stayed straight. Then it was slapped, hard, on the smooth, shaven side. It hurt. His line of sight, shifted sharply to the right by the force of the slap, fell on a pigeon sitting on his window ledge, just at that moment in the middle of a large yawn. Roo could see its pointy pink tongue sitting delicately in its little grey beak. It was the first time he had ever seen a bird’s tongue, and he was about to point this out (taking his hand away from his stinging cheek to do so) when he was slapped again.

“Hey!” he managed angrily, successfully grabbing the towel around his waste before it unravelled and fell, but not managing to get his other hand up to protect his face before the third one landed. Then, before Roo could regain his balance, and possibly to take some of the pain from his cheek, Annabel pressed the heel of her right stiletto down on to the bridge of Roo’s left foot. Before he could yank it away, she twisted the heel sharply downwards, breaking skin and grinding against sensitive bone. Roo screamed out and fell over, hugging his left knee to his chest.

“Just think,” said Annabel coldly while retrieving her coat, “I changed my mind back and forth on my way over here. But I think I did the right thing in the end.” She then put on her coat and left the flat, gently closing the door behind her.

Blood was dripping from Roo’s foot on to his sand coloured carpet. With a stream of loud expletives Roo tugged the towel from his waist and wrapped it around his wounded extremity, gingerly pulled himself upright and hopped to the bathroom. No sooner had he made it there and opened a cabinet door in pursuit of bandage, than the intercom buzzed again. Naked, with a huge towel wrapped around his foot, he hopped aggressively back to the front door, jabbed at the 'speak' button and bellowed:

“Fuck off you bitch! I'm gonna call the fucking police and have you arrested –”

“Roo, it’s me, Peter. What the hell’s going on? I just saw Annabel steaming off down the road in what looked like a mink coat and red high-heels.”

After a short pause during which he could think of nothing at all, Roo wordlessly buzzed his brother in, opened his front door and went back to the bathroom to find that bandage. He was cleaning his wound in the shower with cold water (and cursing loudly at the stinging pain) when Peter walked in and saw the twisted tear in his brother’s foot.

“Jesus Christ Roo! How the hell did that happen!?”

“That whore Annabel and her steel stilettos, that’s how. Help me get this dressed will you.”

But Peter left the bathroom. “Where the fuck are you going?! I’m in here you dick! Where the bandages are, remember?”

“I know! I’m getting you some underwear. I don’t want to have to keep on catching sight of your hairy dick and scrotum while dressing your foot, OK!”

“For fuck’s sake hurry up will you, I’m in agony here!”

Peter helped his brother into the black briefs he had found in the bedroom, smeared some savlon on the wound and dressed it as best he could. When Peter was done Roo tested his foot for walking and found he had to limp quite severely to get about. They both ended up on his sofa staring up out of the skylight. Peter started laughing.

“What’s so fucking funny?”

“You! You ruin everything! I put you in the way of the most beautiful woman in London, who falls for you hook, line and sinker – god knows why – and for some unforeseeable – yet oh so typical – reason, you don’t show up for the most important evening of her young life.” It was her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party, and Roo was to have met her parents, for the first time.

“The girl’s nuts. Look at my face!” Roo twisted his head round so that Peter could see the glowing red cheek with the blurred, hand-shaped welt. “And as if that wasn’t enough, she goes and skewers my foot with her shoe. Forgive me, but that’s not the type of woman I can imagine spending the rest of my life with. And she spends money like a lunatic.”

“How do you imagine spending the rest of your life, actually, since you mentioned it?”

“Oh please, let’s not do this now, huh? I mean, it’s not exactly the right moment, is it.”

But Peter was sitting forward, leaning on his knees and shaking his head in disappointment. “Get a life,” he said softly. “Get a job. Do *something* useful. You are not by any means stupid. You can’t stay this ‘Roothless Roo’ twerp forever – aimless and useless, friendless and –”

“Fuck off and leave me alone would you? What do you know about it anyway?”

Peter turned to face his brother with a look of considerable sympathy. “I know what I see, Roo. And what I see is going nowhere.”

“Everyone is going nowhere, Pete, you should know that. Now get out and leave me alone. Please?”

Peter stood up and looked down at his brother. Roo had his arms across his chest and his legs stretched out. His head was still resting on the back of the sofa, his gaze fixed resolutely on the skylight. He would not look at Peter.

“If you want to talk or you need me for something, you know where I am.”

“On a plane,” mumbled Roo.

Peter sighed. “I don’t have to fly anywhere for at least ten days, so I’m available for a while.” He walked to the door, opened it and stepped into the hall. “Take care of your foot, big brother.”

“I killed a man,” began Roo dramatically, skilfully catching his brother's attention just before the door closed. Peter stepped back into the flat.

“I’m sorry?” he said, not sure whether he should trust his ears, although he had heard each word clearly.

“A lonely old man. He went by the name of Ronald Henry Smith.” Now that he had his brother’s attention, Roo actually started to enjoy the delivery and effect of his utterances.

“What are you talking about?” said Peter, one hand still holding the open door.

“Close the door, sit down and listen to what I’ve been through these last few weeks.”

Peter obeyed, and sat quietly and motionlessly, staring up through the skylight, while Roothless Roo performed verbally the highlights of the last month.

So now we are back where we began, with two brothers side by side on a sofa staring up through a skylight into the blue, neither speaking, the atmosphere tense. A few seconds ticked by, with their customary military precision. Peter was thinking that it couldn’t possibly all be true, but surely no one would make up lies like that. Not even his brother, who had just started to speak again.

“I’ve had this idea for a Play Station game. Well not a whole game, but a sort of hidden feature in that snowboarding game, you know the one I mean. There should be this guy who doesn’t have a snowboard at all, and you can only get him if you push some weird combination of buttons or pull off some amazing trick or something. He stands there, at the top of the mountain, looking sort of lack-lustre and depressed, although you should never be able to see his face – maybe he should wear a balaclava, or you only get to see him from behind – and with a push of the joystick you nudge him over the edge, so that he topples forward and tumbles all the way to the bottom. At first the body should be able to make some desperate attempts to minimise the damage, but would quickly become unconscious, so that the manner and gait of his collapse down the various slopes would look very distressing. The more broken bones and lost blood, the more points. The joystick would act as a means of influencing gravity, so that a skilled player would be able to make for trees and boulders, but in such a way that they do not stop his falling permanently. What do you reckon?”

Roothless Roo looked across at Peter. Peter looked at Roothless Roo. And though they were looking at one another for quite some time, not one iota of sympathy or understanding passed between them.

Peter had started to feel that, well there was the beginning of an intuition that he might now actually start to believe that his brother was mad. Really... mad. Peter believed that if such were the case, there would be nothing he could do about it. It was true that as brothers they had had a somewhat unfortunate past, but some survive these things, others do not. That was life.

Roo could only see that Peter had not heard anything he had said. His eyes were distant and otherwise engaged, probably working out some percentage of something on behalf of some client, some way of making more money. In his way – and this was a continuation of the sigh I drew your attention to in the first chapter of this story – he had started to realise that there was nothing he could do about it.

Peter stood up and made for the door. Half-way there he paused and angled his body as if to turn to say something, seemed to change his mind, carried on to the door, which he opened, and then he left the flat without another word.

Roo was alone again, which was how he wanted it; uninterfered with and free to be himself. He drummed the fingers of both hands on the sofa and paid attention to the throbbing pain in his foot. Then, in defiance of all pressure for change and everything that had gone before, he closed his eyes to listen for signs. Amazingly, he fell deep asleep instead.

The pain in his foot woke him, throbbing and stinging angrily, demanding his attention like a whining, spoilt child. He did not want to take his bandages off, and he certainly did not want to go and wait in A&E for hours on end to be told to go home and put his foot up, so he took a couple of painkillers and started to

think about what he might do tonight. Considering it was a Saturday he reckoned he should be able to find a party somewhere. Getting drunk and losing touch with the glaring sense of focus and pressure that had been mounting these past weeks seemed like the perfect thing to do, especially amongst others doing more or less the same thing. He started calling around, and as luck would have it, got himself invited to a party at Andy's house.

\*

"They've worked out a source of infinite energy," was the first thing Andy said to Roo as he welcomed him in to the party. Roo was as sober as a judge and could only think about putting that straight. He smiled at his friend and said 'hi', but his attention turned quickly to where the kitchen might be.

"Don't you want to know what it is?" asked Andy, smiling.

"Yeah, sure. What was that?"

Andy started again, his spirits unaffected. "They've worked out a source of infinite energy."

"Really?" said Roo.

"Yeah. You take a cat and strap a buttered piece of toast to its back, butter-side up. Then you drop it." Andy paused dramatically.

"Uh-huh," said Roo, in the space allotted to him, a look of almost superhuman disinterest on his face, his eyes fixed on Andy's 'The truth is out there' t-shirt.

"That's right. The cat, of course, can only land on its feet, but the toast must always and only land butter side down; this presents an insoluble dilemma which the cat-toast device cannot resolve. So it just spins in mid-air unable to land. Infinitely." He didn't say 'ta-da' with his voice, but everything else about him did.

"Fantastic," said Roo, not meaning a single syllable of the word, and raised the white plastic bag he was holding into Andy's line of sight (it contained eight tins of Kronenbourg), and asked where the kitchen was.

Andy pointed down the hall. "Just through there."

Roo hobbled in the direction indicated, followed by Andy.

"I'm fine, thanks," said Andy in mock injured tones. "And how are you? You appear to be limping."

"Sorry, Andy," shouted Roo over his shoulder, "I've had a very rough day – month, actually – and I badly

need a beer. And yeah, I had a run-in with a sharp stiletto heel. It was, if you want the full story, attached to a beautiful, naked lady at the time. She's fond of stomping." He closed the fridge door after having loaded his beers into it and now held a cold one in his hand. Straightening up again he said, "how are you, really? You're looking good."

But Andy's face had lit up at the mention of a naked lady. "Beautiful naked lady you say? Fond of stomping? You're going to have to elaborate on that one for me. Please."

"It's a long story," said Roo, cracking open the beer and drinking deeply from the tin. He leaned against the kitchen counter and gave Andy an unreadable smile. The door-bell rang.

"Do not move, I'll be right back," said Andy, and scuttled off to answer the door. But Roo didn't want to talk about that particular, fresh event and sneaked off to prowl the house, looking for girls and distraction. He found some in the living room.

"You must have been training hard!" Roo shouted appreciatively over the pounding music. He was standing beside a small group of girls who were dancing in semi-coordinated moves.

"You what!?" bellowed one of the five.

"Hi, sorry. I'm Roo, a friend of Andy's." All the girls stopped dancing and looked at him as one. "I'd dance, but I've er, injured my foot." Roo was pointing repeatedly at his bandaged foot, his hand moving up and down like a blinking neon sign. His left foot was wearing an undone, loose-laced white trainer, his right a shiny loafer. He stretched his mouth in to what he intended to be a relaxed yet cheeky grin, but realised half-way through that his heart was not in it, and gave up it for dead. This was unusual, perhaps a first even – he certainly couldn't remember it ever having happened before.

"Roothless Roo!" shouted one of the girls. "I've heard about you."

"Scooby dooby Roo, where are you?" sang another, then burst into giggles.

"Haven't you got some work to do now?" asked yet another, barely able to control her voice, and waved her hand at Roo in a dismissive, 'shoo-go-way' manner.

Then all five girls collapsed together in laughter, arms around shoulders, leaning in and against one another, closed off and impenetrable. On another day, Roothless Roo would have picked up the gauntlet and joined in the fun, but somehow the will to join the battle of the sexes was not within easy reach. He smiled, again half-heartedly, turned around and limped quietly back to the kitchen, the sounds of female laughter snapping at his heels. Andy was waiting for him.

“They’re my sister’s friends – a bit immature if you ask me but er, one or two are quite hot little bunnies.”

“Hot little bunnies? Bunnies? Please!” Roo’s voice was more aggressive than the comment deserved, but he didn’t seem to notice or care. He swigged at his beer greedily, gulping down the remainder of the fizzy liquid, which took some doing. The effort resulted in a loud belch, and his right eye released a single tear. As soon as he had recovered from the cold sting of the fizz, he retrieved another can from the fridge and started on it with the same gusto.

“Thirsty work is it?” asked Andy.

“What is?”

“Charming the laaydeez.” Andy tried to sound smooth.

“So that’s what you call it. I don’t know, not really. Failure is though.” Roo took another swig.

Andy said nothing, but watched his old friend closely. He had the feeling he would get nothing useful out of him this evening, and tried to think of something interesting and uncontroversial to say, but before any appropriate topic could bob up to the surface of his suddenly empty mind, his friend pushed off from the sideboard with a set look on his face and made his unsteady way back to the music and the girls. Andy followed and resumed his position in the door-frame, ready for the show.

“So, what are your names?” shouted Roo. He had taken the same position as before, but though his feet were on the floor, there was about him an atmosphere of floating, of hovering.

The girls stopped dancing again and turned to face him. Time was giving birth to a moment, you could feel it – despite the loud, thumping music, it went eerily quiet. Roo drank from his can in a slow, uncertain movement, almost changing his mind half way through his arm’s arc. Had it been possible, a tangled ball of tumble-weed would have rolled through the room.

The girl with the mousy hair and long, grey, figure-hugging dress broke the tension.

“Hi, I’m Velma, this is Daphne, she’s Shaggy, that’s Freddie, and she’s er, she’s a little monster. And *you* are Scooby Roo.” They all burst out laughing.

It was no good, his charm had somehow deserted him – he couldn’t even manage a smile. But he had to say something. Without thinking, without censoring or even contemplating what they might be, he unleashed the first words that arrived at his lips.

“You’re all crap dancers anyway!”

In perfect unison, five female voices retorted with an absolutely text-book “oooOOOooohhh!”, and OK, it landed on his back – he had at least managed to turn away from them before they fired it off – but land it did. It struck like a wind and blew him effortlessly out of the room, past an already quickly retreating Andy, and into the corridor where he stood, empty-headed, with no clue as to what to do next. Then the doorbell rang.

Being nearest to the door, he went to it and opened it. It was Alice. She looked stunning and was at that very moment dramatically backlit by the sweeping headlights of a passing car.

“Mary mother of God! Just what the hell is going on!?” he cried, barely keeping his darker emotions below his throat, where he preferred them – hidden from the spotlight of his mind.

Alice had seen quite a rich variety of expressions on Roo’s face in the short time they had spent together, but the one she now observed had to be the most complex of them all. Asked to describe it she would probably have been at a loss for words, such was the mish-mash of writhing and struggling she saw there. He didn’t seem capable of speech and just stared at her, his quite small eyes suddenly bug-like in their intensity.

After a short pause while she adjusted to the fact that she was looking at Roo, and that his greeting was in fact no greeting, she decided to answer his blurted question, saying, informatively, “I’ve come to Andy’s party.” Then she asked, with growing concern; “What’s the matter? Has something happened?”

Roo didn’t answer, but his face showed signs of settling on a single, comprehensible shape, which looked like it was going to be irritation.

“Are you OK!?” shouted Alice, her confusion and concern not dissipated by the increasingly clear message from Roo’s face. The more urgent tone in her voice caught his attention.

“Come in,” he said, suddenly back from his brief immersion into an inner emotional labyrinth, “come in and join the fun!” He sounded angry and hurt, and spat out the word ‘fun’ as if it were an old, foetid piece of meat he had finally extricated from between two teeth.

Alice, surprised anyway that Roo had answered the door, was shocked at the venom in his voice, the repressed rage she heard there. As she walked past him she noticed how he limped back against the corridor wall to allow her through, and caught sight of the odd shoes, the bandage, the tongue pulled out and forward from the white trainer, the disc of dried blood, and shivered – the injury, his awkward gait, the way he held his beer, all added up to a disturbing picture. She heard the door close and felt him shuffling along after her as she made her way to Andy who was standing just outside the kitchen. They greeted one another warmly.

“You two know each other do you?” asked Roo.

They both turned to face him, their faces and body language wary in his presence.

“We know each other from Childline,” said Alice.

Roo nodded and drank from his can. Then he looked at them both, studying and judging them without a trace of compassion or affection, his eyes and mouth tight and mean.

“Andy’s got a small dick,” he announced casually, now looking at his beer can, which he was swinging in a small circle, gauging the swilling weight of the remaining liquid. “I saw it in the showers at school, so I know what I’m talking about.” Then he downed the rest of his beer, and made to go past them to get to the kitchen for another. But Alice stopped him, putting her hand on his shoulder and pulled at it, so that Roo’s ear was lowered to her mouth.

“Now I know what you see in those arseholes you call friends.” The words were whispered, but they were hot and angry, and flew into him like a swarm of wasps. He sullenly shrugged his shoulder free from her grip and pushed forward into the kitchen, making for the fridge. Andy and Alice went into the living room.

Roothless Roo was not good at standing, or indeed sitting in one place for very long, but he planted himself beside the fridge like an old tree and stayed put, eyes to the floor, and drank and drank. His broody, self-pitying atmosphere ensured that nobody dared speak to him and he made no effort to engage in conversation any of the people who had to pass him to get to the drinks. He was a wallflower by a fridge in a kitchen at a party somewhere in suburbia, silent and drooping.

He was engaged in a battle, a struggle with his predicament, his situation, his reality, trying his best to ignore, to smother the increasingly loud suspicion that he was in fact lonely and getting lonelier. With each swig from each can of beer he put away, he was trying to drown out Ronald Henry Smith's face, which was staring up at him from deep inside his stomach, promising an ending as stupid and ungainly as his had been.

After an hour or so he was wrenched from his private, muddy battlefield by a deep swoop of alcohol induced vertigo and had to catch his balance on the kitchen side-board. Had he remembered the purpose of his drunkenness he would have been pleased to find that the face and the feeling were gone. He did notice however, that he was at that moment alone in the kitchen, that the music was still loud and thumping, that he was holding an almost full tin of beer, and that he needed desperately to pee. He placed his drink carefully on the counter, pushed himself gently upright and found his way to the stairs, which were dotted with people, sitting and standing, chatting and drinking.

“Loo?” he mumbled to the first person he saw.

“Top of the stairs, left, the door at the end,” came the reply.

“Cheers,” said Roo, and made his way there as directed.

When he stepped out of the loo he saw Alice ahead of him, talking to a girl he did not recognise. He paused to watch her and could make out how attentively and compassionately she was listening. There was about her that warmth and honesty he had once recoiled from, but which he now saw as an old friend he had missed for years. He longed for it, wanted to receive the exact sympathy that other girl was getting, so limped over, happy that Alice was here again, excited at the prospect of her friendship.

“What are you two talking about?” he said as he came to a stop beside them.

From his slurred speech and out-of-focus eyes they recognised instantly how drunk he was. But his face had lost its bitter quality of earlier and, for obvious reasons, looked lost, even boyish. Alice suddenly felt sorry for him, and asked what had happened to his foot.

“My girlfriend – ex-girlfriend – trod on it. She was wearing stilettos and I wasn’t. Wearing any shoes I mean.”

“Oh ow!” said Alice. “Poor you. Do your friends always end up, erm, injuring you?”

Roo paused for a moment. “S a good question. I’ll think about it.”

There followed a small stretch of silence. Alice and her friend exchanged glances.

“Roo, this is Denise. Denise, this is Roo.”

Roo and Denise exchanged hellos.

“Denise is going through a bad patch right now,” continued Alice.

“Me too, me too,” said Roo, with some enthusiasm, “I’ve had a horrible day. Whassthe matter with you, Denise Denise?”

Denise looked at her feet. “My parents are divorcing.”

Roo’s face darkened so quickly it made him look deranged. “Parents!?” he spat. “Oh fuck them! You don’t want to care about them. They sure as fuck don’t care about *you*.”

He stabbed a finger at Denise and swung forwards, following it precariously, as Denise leaned back away

from him.

“Take me.” Roo spread his arms out wide, regaining his balance, finding his voice. “My mother hated me, HATED me. Probbly said as much too probbly, I can’t remember; anyway she was always telling me how stupid I was. Then she left us without warning – I don’t even know where she is! – and a few years later my dad goes and commits suicide. He was such a fucking wimp.” But Roo failed to notice that his words, barked out without a trace of compassion, were not comforting Denise – indeed she looked, to a more sober judge, like she was losing her temper.

Roo marched on regardless, fired up by a surge of wonderfully liberating aggression, his voice by now so loud everyone in the upstairs corridor and on the stairs had turned to listen and watch.

“Take a leaf out of my book – fuck ‘em! They are selfish WANKERS and you’re better off without them! Grow up, little girl, and forget ‘em.” The last words were more growled than spoken, Roo’s face twisted by an ugly rage, his eyes burning angrily.

Denise exploded with a wordless shout and punched him square in the mouth, the jagged rings of her right hand splitting his upper lip. He dropped to the floor like a man shot dead, his face an open 'O' of shock. She had never seen anything like it. She watched Roo fall back onto his arse, the arrogant, hateful puff knocked out of his face, then scabble quickly onto all fours to look up, like a frightened dog, at Alice. This was obviously not a real man – one little girly punch and he collapses like a deck of cards and starts blubbing like a baby. She could not believe it – he was actually crying. As Denise turned to leave the embarrassing scene she was aware that Alice had got down on her knees to hug him. Walking past the other party guests she watched their faces staring at the mess of spluttering blood, saliva and sobbing that was Roothless Roo, thinking how rude they were to be so nosey.

Alice felt their attentions too, and having looked into the helpless darkness of Rupert’s eyes, having seen his face stripped of all buoyancy and life, and having heard his pathetic mantra (he could not stop repeating ‘I’m so alone’), resolved to take him somewhere quiet and private. She stood up, helped him to his knees, and led him into the nearest bedroom, closing the door behind them.

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When Rupert woke up it was already morning and he discovered that he could not open his mouth – his lips were somehow stuck together. He lay still, not wanting to open his eyes and find out where he was, not wanting to know why his lips were sealed, enjoying for a moment the strange yet pleasant sense of anonymity and newness. For a while he was aware of no memories pressing at the door of his mind – his head, though throbbing, was refreshingly empty. It was a nice feeling.

But sadly the blank-slate state did not last – suddenly, there it all was. All knowledge of last night, as complete and colourful as a photograph, was there before his mind’s eye for him to study and absorb. He had hardly taken in more than two or three painful details when he heard a door open and close, followed by soft footsteps and what sounded like a bowl being put down on a table. He lay quiet and still, pretending to be asleep. He listened to the reassuring noises of a flannel being lifted from water and wrung out, felt the careful weight of someone sitting down on the bed beside him, then felt the flannel’s fabric, cool and moist, being gently applied to his lips. They were sore and swollen, caked in blood. He felt the blood being sponged free, felt the flannel teasing his lips apart, touching his teeth, and finally felt a female hand push his hair back from his forehead. He knew to whom the hand belonged. He opened his eyes and tried his voice.

“Thank you.” It creaked like an old wooden carriage.

“You’re most welcome.” Alice was smiling at him.

“Why are you helping me?”

“Because I enjoy it. And because I’m curious about you.”

Rupert could not hold Alice’s gaze, but liked having her attention on him all the same. She asked how he was feeling. He responded with a heartfelt and gravelly “rough”, when something occurred to him. He suddenly remembered how they first met, and though it seemed a lifetime ago, he now felt keenly and for the first time since their evening together, the weight of the boast he had made. To his enormous surprise an answer was fermenting behind his swollen lips. It had something to do with balance and redress and was only now becoming clear to him because... Actually he wasn’t sure why, but something was definitely bubbling up to the surface.

“I was supposed to prove to you that you know the meaning of life, wasn’t I?”

“You were, and I’m glad you’ve finally remembered.”

Rupert blinked a couple of times, then realised that whatever it was that had just begun to take shape, that had seemed the beginning of an explanation, had started to evaporate. He struggled inwardly for a few seconds, diving down and clutching at the vanishing words, but they flitted free from his fingers. He came up with nothing. Alice was quietly waiting.

“I had something just now, but it’s gone.” He could not look at her.

“Oh well, never mind. I’m sure you’ll think of it again.” Rupert was surprised and relieved to hear that she didn’t sound in the least bit disappointed.

Then she smiled and got up and took the bowl back to wherever it came from, leaving Rupert alone in his friend's room, tentatively exploring his cut lip with his tongue and wiggling the toes of his left foot. When she returned she had two aspirin and a glass of water. The aspirin, like always, tasted horrible, but the water was wonderful.

Roo and Alice said goodbye on a street corner, both having decided to walk their respective ways home. They had agreed to agree on nothing definite, but Alice had said she would be happy to talk should Rupert want to.

Roo's hangover, muted by the aspirin, was reactivated by the hot sun beating down on him, but the walk home, which took over two hours, did him good nevertheless. Despite his throbbing lip, despite the growing pain of his left foot, he felt light and airy, as unburdened as he ever had.

Finally standing in his flat and looking around him, appreciating as if for the first time his QAD stereo system, his flat-screen Sony TV, his JVC DVD player and his collection of DVDs, CDs and PS2 games, Roo decided that he liked solitude. Solitude liberally peppered with acquaintances and enriched by the selfish pursuit of pleasure to be sure, but solitude nevertheless. Oh yes indeed, there was nothing wrong with his setup whatsoever.

Not wanting to stand in silence a second longer, and feeling the need for some music, he put on a CD and went to take a shower, which was an awkward experience since he had to dangle his left foot outside the cabin. Enjoying the water immensely he ended up sitting down, for a long time swaying back and forth from the edge of sleep. By the time he had had enough and switched off the shower, 'Lover, You Should Have Come Over' was playing, and the words caught his attention:

'Sometimes a man gets carried away,  
'When he feels like he should be having his fun  
'Much too blind to see the damage he's done –  
'Sometimes a man must awake to find that, really,  
'He has no one...'

He was looking at himself in the bathroom mirror, at his swollen lip, and suddenly relived the punch that had caused it so vividly, that his head flinched backwards. He felt again the shocking bony thump of the bunched fist, the ring's jagged edge splitting his lip, and then the sense of collapse, both outer and inner, the subsequent fear and infinite emptiness, and finally Alice's warm embrace.

He shuddered involuntarily, massively, like a dog shaking itself dry after emerging from a river, shook his head clear and proceeded to brush his teeth, putting firmly behind him everything he wanted firmly behind him.

It occurred to him mid-brush, in a burst of pleasure and sweet realisation, that he had not been to the cinema for over a month, and craved the taste of popcorn and ice cold coke, longed for the privacy and warmth of the cosy cinema seat and the beguiling, hypnotic thrill of a movie. Yes, tonight Leicester Square would witness his return.

“Now that,” he said, pointing his foaming toothbrush at his happy reflection, “is what I call music.”